

Voting and Electioneering, 1789-1899

Because the Constitution gives states the job of running elections, ways of voting in the United States vary. Americans have developed a patchwork of manual, mechanical, and electronic balloting. Many methods once common in the past are still used in some places today.



Wooden ballot with clay marbles

The term “ballot” is derived from the Italian *ballotta*, meaning “little ball.” This ballot box was not used in a U.S. election. It was used by members of a Washington, D.C., social club.

Gift of Society for the Oldest Inhabitants of Washington, D.C.

[View object record](#) [collections/nmah_529014](#)

American Invention

The earliest elections were conducted by voice vote or with paper ballots put into ballot boxes. These paper ballots, called “party tickets,” listed names from just one party, and they were counted under the watchful eye of local party and

election officials. As the United States grew and the electorate expanded in the decades following the Civil War, improvements appeared in the form of the Australian or blanket ballots that listed the names of all candidates, ballot boxes with mechanical security features, and mechanical ballot counters.





Glass ballot jar with a lockable wooden housing, 1884

The glass ballot jar became a symbol of democratic self-government. This 1884 glass ballot jar is typical of the transparent devices used to secure paper ballots.

View object record /collections/nmah_739494

VOL. X.-No. 245

NOVEMBER 16, 1881.

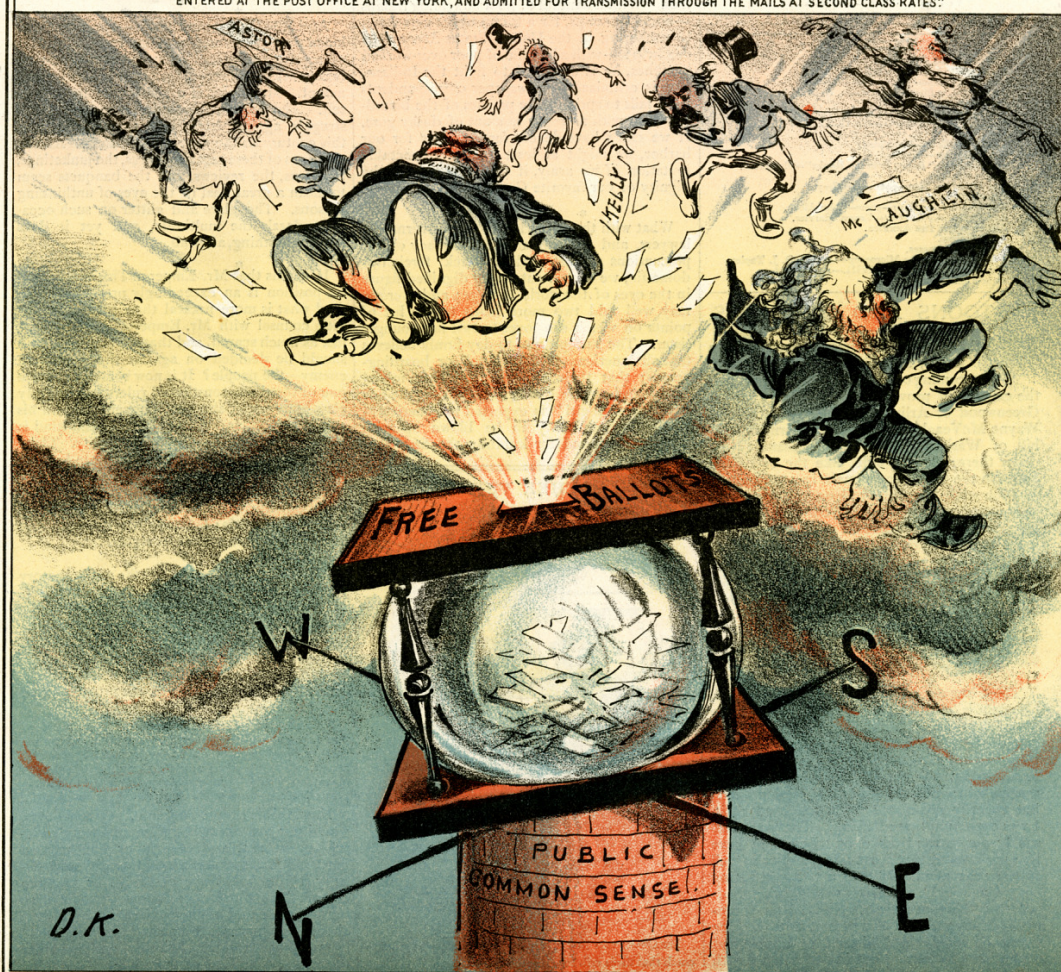
Price, 10 Cents.

"What fools these Mortals be!"
MIDSUMMER-NIGHTS DREAM.

Suck

PUBLISHED BY
KEPPLER & SCHWARZMANN.
NEW YORK
TRADE MARK REGISTERED 1876.
OFFICE No. 21-23 WARREN ST.

"ENTERED AT THE POST OFFICE AT NEW YORK, AND ADMITTED FOR TRANSMISSION THROUGH THE MAILS AT SECOND CLASS RATES."



AMERICAN INVENTION FOR BLOWING UP BOSSES.

"American Invention for Blowing Up Bosses," *Puck*, November 16, 1881

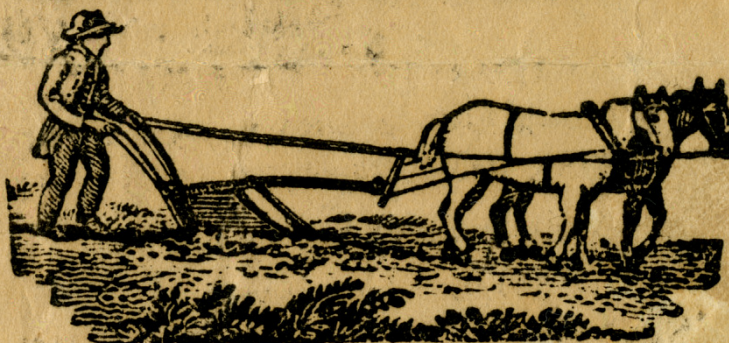
Gift of Ralph E. Becker Collection of Political Americana

[View object record </collections/nmah_498493>](#)

Paper Ballots

Voting in the 19th century usually involved casting a printed paper ballot. State election laws typically specified the dimensions and thickness of the paper, and the size of type to be used. The rest was left to the issuing parties, local party operatives, and candidates, resulting in various ballot forms and styles—and a potential for voter confusion and fraud.

**FREE SOIL
ELECTORAL TICKET.**



For President of the United States,
MARTIN VAN BUREN,
OF NEW YORK.

For Vice-President of the United States,
CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS,
OF MASSACHUSETTS.

Electors for the State at Large.

DAVID GAMBLE, of Frederick County,
JOHN REYNOLDS, of Cecil County.

For the Congressional Districts.

DARIUS THOMAS,
ELISHA B. CUNNINGHAM,
EDMUND H. LEWIS,
JOHN HAMPDEN WILLIAMS,
ELLIS P. HOWARD,
SAMUEL S. STEVENS.

Paper ballot, "Free Soil Electoral Ticket," 1848

Gift of Dr. Harry Lepman

[View object record </collections/nmah_529060>](#)

UNION TICKET.

Judge of Circuit Court,
John W. Kennedy.
State Senator,
Owen D. Downey.
Delegates to Legislature,
Benjamin F. Harrison,
Joseph F. Gordon.
Recorder,
Robert Lamon.
Prosecuting Attorney,
Luther M. Shaffer.
Superintendent of Free Schools,
John O'Connell.
Assessor,
Edwin S. Dorsey.

UNION TICKET.

Judge of Circuit Court,
John W. Kennedy.
State Senator,
Owen D. Downey.
Delegates to Legislature,
Benjamin F. Harrison,
Joseph F. Gordon.
Recorder,
Robert Lamon.
Prosecuting Attorney,
Luther M. Shaffer.
Superintendent of Free Schools,
John O'Connell.
Assessor,
Edwin S. Dorsey.

UNION TICKET.

Judge of Circuit Court,
John W. Kennedy.
State Senator,
Owen D. Downey.
Delegates to Legislature,
Benjamin F. Harrison,
Joseph F. Gordon.
Recorder,
Robert Lamon.
Prosecuting Attorney,
Luther M. Shaffer.
Superintendent of Free Schools,
John O'Connell.
Assessor,
Edwin S. Dorsey.

UNION TICKET.

Judge of Circuit Court,
John W. Kennedy.
State Senator,
Owen D. Downey.
Delegates to Legislature,
Benjamin F. Harrison,
Joseph F. Gordon.

UNION TICKET.

Judge of Circuit Court,
John W. Kennedy.
State Senator,
Owen D. Downey.
Delegates to Legislature,
Benjamin F. Harrison,
Joseph F. Gordon.
Recorder,
Robert Lamon.
Prosecuting Attorney,
Luther M. Shaffer.
Superintendent of Free Schools,
John O'Connell.
Assessor,
Edwin S. Dorsey.

UNION TICKET.

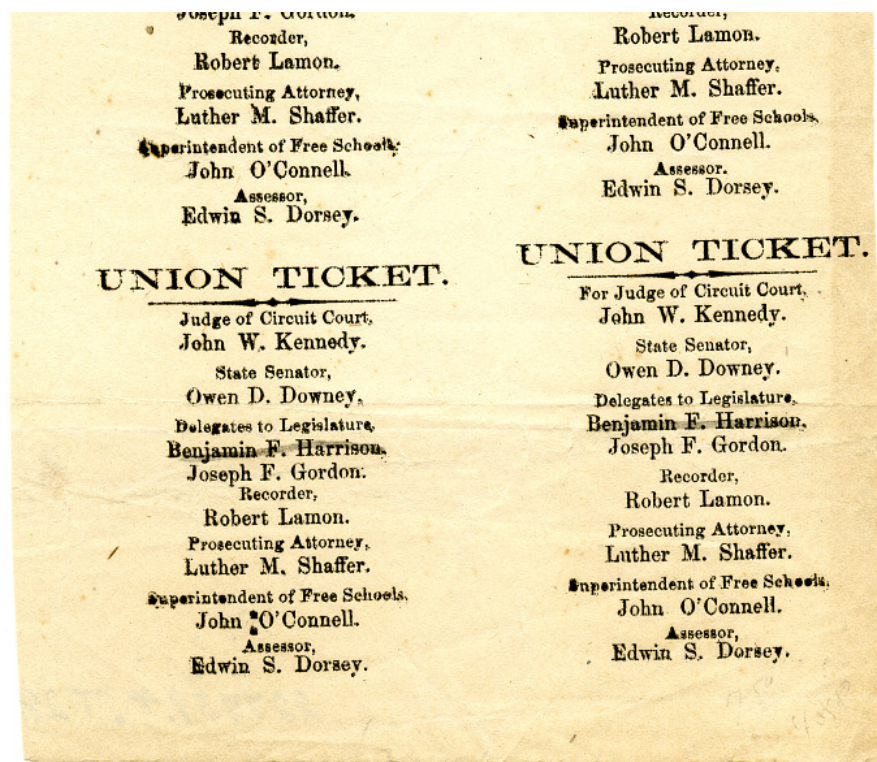
Judge of Circuit Court,
John W. Kennedy.
State Senator,
Owen D. Downey.
Delegates to Legislature,
Benjamin F. Harrison,
Joseph F. Gordon.
Recorder,
Robert Lamon.
Prosecuting Attorney,
Luther M. Shaffer.
Superintendent of Free Schools,
John O'Connell.
Assessor,
Edwin S. Dorsey.

UNION TICKET.

Judge of Circuit Court,
John W. Kennedy.
State Senator,
Owen D. Downey.
Delegates to Legislature,
Benjamin F. Harrison,
Joseph F. Gordon.
Recorder,
Robert Lamon.
Prosecuting Attorney,
Luther M. Shaffer.
Superintendent of Free Schools,
John O'Connell.
Assessor,
Edwin S. Dorsey.

UNION TICKET.

Judge of Circuit Court,
John W. Kennedy.
State Senator,
Owen D. Downey.
Delegates to Legislature,
Benjamin F. Harrison,
Joseph F. Gordon.
Recorder,



Ballot sheet, Union Ticket, Maryland, 1860

Gift of Ralph E. Becker Collection of Political Americana

[View object record </collections/nmah_520374>](#)

VIRGINIA UNION TICKET.

PLATFORM

The Union;
The Constitution, and
The Enforcement of
the Laws.

ELECTION DAY, —

November 6th., 1860.

FOR PRESIDENT,

Hon. JOHN BELL,
OF TENNESSEE.

FOR VICE PRESIDENT,

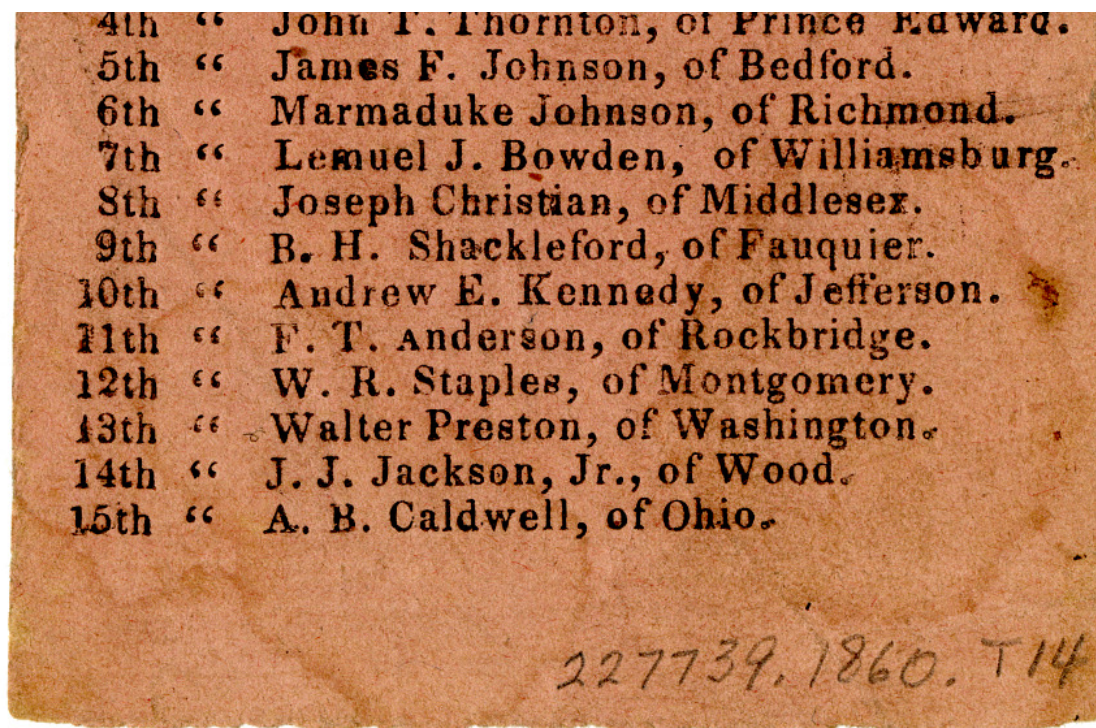
Hon. EDWARD EVERETT,
OF MASSACHUSETTS.

ELECTORS.

1st Dist. L. H. Chandler, of Norfolk City.

2nd " Travis H. Epes, of Nottoway.

3rd " Thomas Bruce, of Halifax.



Virginia Union ticket, 1860

Gift of Ralph E. Becker Collection of Political Americana

[View object record </collections/nmah_520214>](#)

More so than the distinguishing marks of party symbols or candidate portraits, color helped observers identify party ballots as they were cast—and who cast them. Voting was still not entirely secret. The parties printed and distributed paper ballots cut from sheets. Virginia's Union Party issued a pink paper ticket in 1860. The introduction of a complex color scheme distinguished the official ballot of the 1878 Regular Republican ticket in Massachusetts.

REGULAR REPUBLICAN TICKET.



FOR GOVERNOR:—

THOMAS TALBOT, OF BILLERICA.

FOR LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR:—

JOHN D. LONG, OF HINGHAM.

FOR SECRETARY OF THE COMMONWEALTH:—

HENRY B. PEIRCE, OF ABINGTON.

FOR TREASURER AND RECEIVER GENERAL:—

CHARLES ENDICOTT, OF CANTON.

FOR AUDITOR:—

JULIUS L. CLARKE, OF NEWTON.

FOR ATTORNEY GENERAL:—

GEO. MARSTON, OF NEW BEDFORD.

For Councillor, 2d District,
WILLIAM O. THAYER, OF BOSTON.

For Representative to Congress,
BENJAMIN W. FARRIS, OF E. BRIDGEWATER.

For County Commissioner,
HENRY A. THAYER, OF TAUNTON.

For Register of Probate and Insolvency,
WILLIAM E. FULLER, OF TAUNTON.

For Senator, First Bristol District,
EZRA DAVOL, OF TAUNTON.

For Representatives to General Court, First Bristol
District,

William D. Witherell, of Norton.
John Stanley, of Attleborough.



Republican ballot, 1878

Gift of Ralph E. Becker Collection of Political Americana

[View object record </collections/nmah_520279>](#)

REPUBLICAN AND INDEPENDENT TICKET

Copyright, 1884, by ROCKWELL & CHURCHILL, 39 Arch St., Boston.

FOR PRESIDENT.

GROVER CLEVELAND, . . of New York.

FOR VICE-PRESIDENT,

THOMAS A. HENDRICKS, . . of Indiana.

FOR PRESIDENTIAL ELECTORS.

AT LARGE.

JONAS H. FRENCH, . . of Gloucester.

REUBEN NOBLE, . . of Westfield.

District No.

BY DISTRICTS.

1. GEORGE DELANO, . . of New Bedford.
2. BUSHROD MORSE, . . of Sharon.
3. FRANCIS A. PETERS, . . of Boston.
4. HUGH A. MADDEN, . . of Boston.
5. CHRISTOPHER E. RYMES, of Somerville.
6. KNOWLES FREEMAN, . . of Chelsea.
7. CHARLES P. THOMPSON, of Gloucester.
8. JOHN C. SANBORN, . . of Lawrence.
9. JAMES E. COTTER, . . of Hyde Park.
10. WALDO LINCOLN, . . of Worcester.
11. FESTUS C. CURRIER, . . of Fitchburg.
12. ELISHA B. MAYNARD, . of Springfield.

FOR GOVERNOR,

GEORGE D. ROBINSON, . . of Chicopee.

FOR LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR,

OLIVER AMES, of Easton.

For Secretary of the Commonwealth,

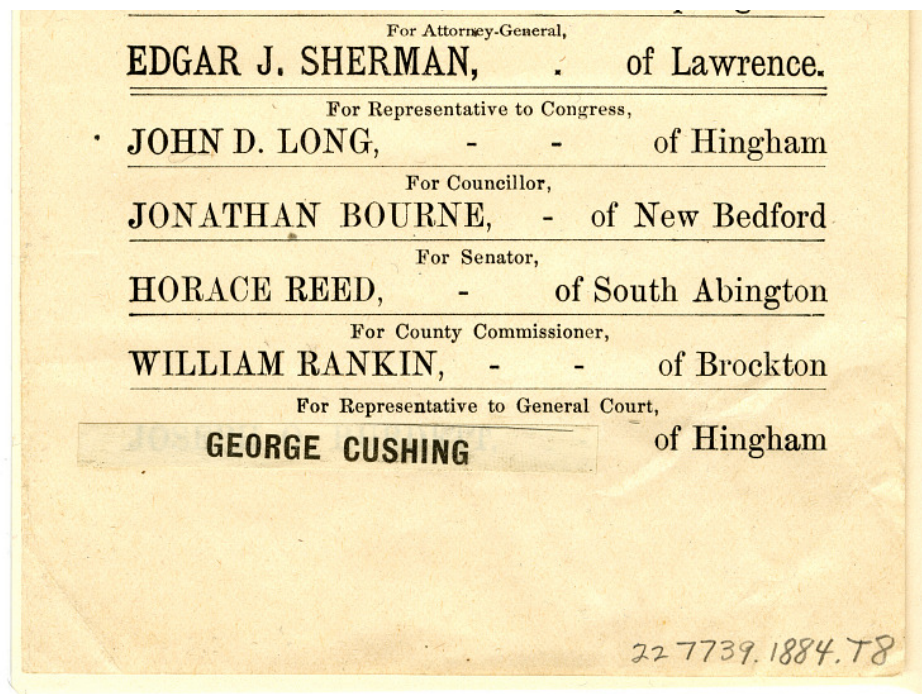
HENRY B. PEIRCE, . . . of Abington.

For Treasurer and Receiver General,

DANIEL A. GLEASON, . . of Medford.

For Auditor,

CHARLES R. LADD, . . . of Springfield.



Republican and Independent ballot, 1884

Gift of Ralph E. Becker Collection of Political Americana

[View object record </collections/nmah_520301>](#)

The Acme of Reform

Political manipulation and election fraud was often compared to a well-oiled machine. Reformers determined to fight political machines with ballot reform and voting machines. The addition of an internal cylinder “roller” to this late 19th-century ballot box ensured that once a ballot was rolled into the box it could not be tampered with or seen. This box was probably used in New England.



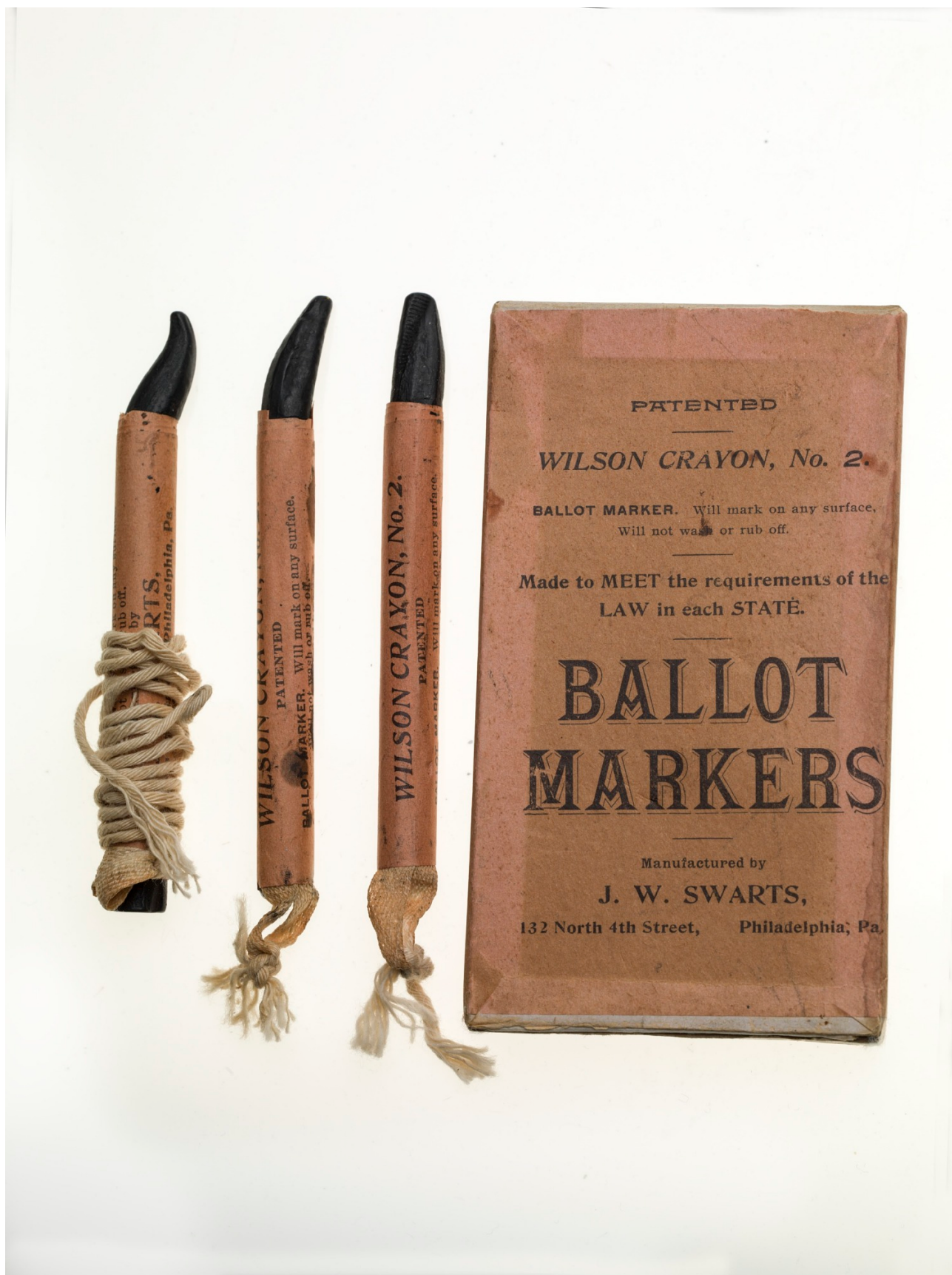
The Acme ballot box, 1880

The Blanket Ballot

Developed in South Australia in the 1850s, the blanket ballot—listing all candidates for office regardless of party—was gradually adopted in the United States after 1888. The printing and distribution of such all-inclusive ballots became a function of government rather than competing parties. The voter typically marked the ballot in the privacy of a voting booth, sometimes guided by party symbols—like the eagle guarding a glass jar ballot box representing the Republican ticket of William McKinley and Garret A. Hobart, top left.

THE BALLOT SHOULD BE MARKED IN ONE OF TWO WAYS WITH A PENCIL, LEAVING BLACK LINES TO VOTE A STRAIGHT TICKET; MAKE A CROSS OR MARK WITHIN THE CIRCLE ABOVE EACH OF THE PARTY COUNCILORS.
TO VOTE A SPLIT TICKET, THAT IS, FOR CANDIDATES OF DIFFERENT PARTIES, THE VOTER SHOULD MAKE A CROSS OR MARK BEFORE THE NAME OF EACH CANDIDATE FOR WHOM HE WOULD VOTE.
IF THE TICKET MARKED IN THE CIRCLE FOR A STRAIGHT TICKET DOES NOT CONTAIN THE NAME OF THE CANDIDATE FOR WHOM THE VOTER DESIRES TO VOTE, HE MAY VOTE FOR CANDIDATE FOR WHOM HE DESIRES, BUT SUCH VOTES ARE NOT COUNTED BY MAKING A CROSS OR MARK WITHIN THE CIRCLE FOR A CANDIDATE OF THE PARTY FOR WHICH HE WOULD VOTE.
WHEN WRITING THE NAMES, IF THEY ARE NOT PRESENT UPON THE BALLOT, IN THE BLANK SPACES UNDER THE TITLE OF THE OFFICE.
TO VOTE FOR A PERSON NOT ON THE BALLOT, WRITE THE NAME OF SUCH PERSON, UNDER THE TITLE OF THE OFFICE, IN THE BLANK SPACES.
IT IS THE VOTER'S DUTY TO VOTE FOR THE PERSON OF HIS CHOICE, BUT HE MAY VOTE FOR ANY PERSON HE DESIRES, OR HE MAY REFUSE TO VOTE.
IF THE VOTER, OR EMPLOYEE, OR WITNESS MARKS, OR IN ANY MANNER MAKES OF THE BALLOT MARKED IN THIS MANNER, AND NO VOTE CAN BE COUNTED THEREON.
IF THE VOTER, OR EMPLOYEE, OR WITNESS MARKS, OR IN ANY MANNER MAKES OF THE BALLOT MARKED IN THIS MANNER, AND NO VOTE CAN BE COUNTED THEREON.

[illegible]



Ballot markers, 1908

These crayons were made to be tied to the writing surface of a booth where voters could mark their ballots in private.

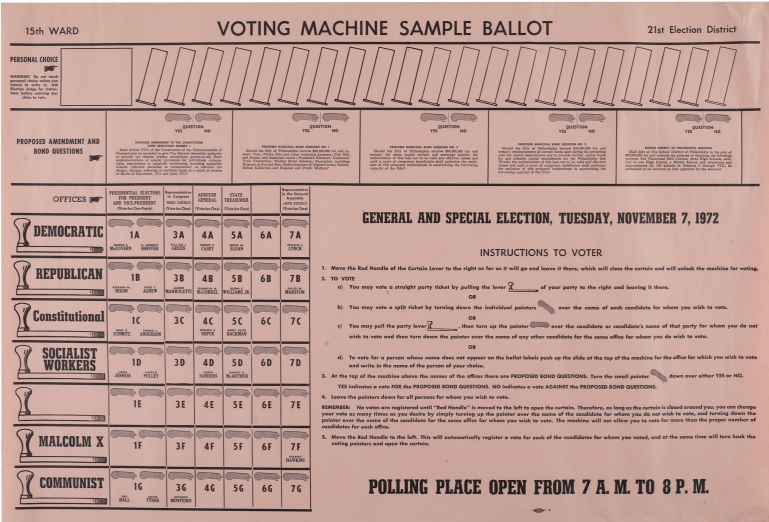
Gear-and-Lever

The gear-and-lever voting machine rendered the Australian ballot in steel. Later, computerized punch card ballots became an acceptable alternative that allowed for the speedy tabulation and announcement of returns.



Magazine, *The New Yorker*, November 3, 1956

View object record </collections/nmah_1444327>



Poster used as sample voting machine ballot, 1972

Gift of Robert Hassert

View object record </collections/nmah_1195392>

The Butterfly Ballot



Punch card vote recorder with butterfly ballot, 2000
Gift of Palm Beach County Supervisors of Elections

[View object record </collections/nmah_875590>](/collections/nmah_875590)

The close presidential contest between Al Gore and George W. Bush came down to a struggle over the Florida vote. In Florida Bush led Gore by 930 votes out of six million votes cast. Gore asked for a recount by hand of ballots from four counties in which his support was believed to be strong. To conduct the

recount in Palm Beach County, citizens organized into teams of two Republican and two Democratic Party counters and observers. A magenta-colored card is used to help identify the holes in the ballots.



Citizen ballot counters and observers examining Votomatic punch cards, Emergency Operations Center, West Palm Beach, Florida, November 2000

Courtesy of William L. Bird

Hanging Chad



Magnifying glass, 2000

Gift of Robert Rosenberg

[View object record </collections/nmah_694858>](#)

In the 2000 presidential election, incompletely punched ballots that could not be counted by machine were considered voter errors. Judge Robert Rosenberg used this magnifying glass to examine ballots in an effort to determine voter intent during the hand recount in Broward County, Florida, in November 2000.



Judge Robert Rosenberg examining ballot with magnifying glass, Broward County, Florida, November 2000
Courtesy of Associated Press

Hours & Admission

Open every day, except December 25, from 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Admission is free and no tickets are required.

Location & Contact

1300 Constitution Ave NW,
Washington, DC 20560 <<https://www.google.com/maps/place/smithsonian+national+museum+of+american+history/@38.8912835,-77.0322449,17z>>

Contact Information </about/contact>

Our mission is to empower people to create a just and compassionate future by exploring, preserving, and sharing the complexity of our past.

Sign Up For Our Newsletter

Donate </support>

Email powered by MailChimp

(Privacy Policy & Terms of Use <<https://mailchimp.com/legal/>>)

Press Center </press> **Shop Museum Store** <<https://www.smithsonianstore.com/category/museums/american-history.do>> **Smithsonian Institution**
<<https://www.si.edu>> **Privacy** <<https://www.si.edu/privacy>> **Terms of Use** <<https://www.si.edu/termsfuse>>

